

Message Text

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 02411 01 OF 02 140336Z

ACTION NEA-10

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 2411

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, PINS, CE

SUBJ: SEPARATIST TAMILS: AN ELECTION DILEMMA

SUMMARY: THE TAMIL UNITED LIBERATION FRONT (TULF), A UNION OF THE MAJOR TAMIL ORGANIZATIONS IN SRI LANKA, WILL ATTEMPT TO DEMONSTRATE AT NEXT WEEK'S GENERAL ELECTION THAT IT HAS THE SUPPORT OF THE TAMIL COMMUNITY FOR ITS SECESSIONIST DEMANDS. ITS OWN SUCCESS, IF ACCOMPANIED BY THE LACK OF A CLEAR-CUT DECISION BETWEEN THE MAJOR NATIONAL PARTIES, COULD CONFRONT IT WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN A GOVERNING NATIONAL COALITION. SUCH PARTICIPATION HAS BEEN REJECTED BY THE PARTY'S GENERAL SECRETARY AND WOULD AROUSE OUTRAGE AMONG THE MILITANT YOUTH; NEVERTHELESS IT CANNOT BE RULED OUT. THE TULF PLATFORM CALLS FOR ITS ELECTED M.P.'S TO PARTICIPATE IN A SEPARATE ASSEMBLY TO WRITE A CONSTITUTION FOR THEIR SEPARATE STATE; THEY WOULD PRESUMABLY CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY AS WELL. END SUMMARY.

2. THE TAMIL UNITED LIBERATION FRONT (TULF), ALTHOUGH PARTY LEADERS REFUSE TO ADMIT IT, HAS A DUAL AND CONTRADICTIONARY ROLE

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PAGE 02 COLOMB 02411 01 OF 02 140336Z

TO PLAY IN THIS YEAR'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN. FIRST, THE PARTY MUST PROVE TO THE COUNTRY THAT IT HAS THE SUPPORT OF THE TAMIL VOERTERS FOR ITS DEMAND FOR A SEPARATE STATE IN THE NORTH AND EAST OF THE ISLAND. SECOND, THE TULF WILL HAVE A CRUCIAL ROLE TO PLAY IF NEITHER THE UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP) NOR THE SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) WINS A CLEAR MAJORITY OF ASSEMBLY SEATS. THE TULF LEADERS WOULD THEN HAVE TO DECIDE HOW FULLY

THEY WANT TO INTEGRATE THEIR PARTY INTO THE POLITICAL OPERATIONS OF THE SINHALESE-DOMINATED NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY. PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY, A. AMIRTHALINGAM, HAS GIVEN HIS PUBLIC ANSWER. THERE WILL BE NO POST-ELECTION SUPPORT, HE HAS SAID, FOR ANY PARTY. SOME POLITICAL OBSERVERS ARE SKEPTICAL, HOWEVER, POINTING OUT THAT THE PROSPECT OF CABINET PORTFOLIOS AND WINNING SUBSTANTIAL CONCESSIONS FOR THE TAMILS COULD BE A STRONG LURE FOR THE TULF TO JOIN A "NATIONAL" COALITION. (THE TULF'S POLITICAL PREDECESSOR, THE FEDERAL PARTY, DID JUST THAT AFTER THE 1965 ELECTION ONLY TO LATER DECLARE ITSELF "BETRAYED" BY ITS UNP COALITION PARTNER.)

3. THE PRIMARY DANGER TO THE TULF IN ENTERING A COALITION IS THE CERTAIN OUTRAGE OF THE PARTY'S INCREASINGLY MILITANT YOUTH. IF SUCH RADICAL OPPOSITION MAKES PARTICIPATION IN A GOVERNMENT UNTENABLE, THE TULF MIGHT INSTEAD MERELY AGREE NOT TO VOTE AGAINST AND BRING DOWN A MINORITY GOVERNMENT IN EXCHANGE FOR TAMIL LANGUAGE CONCESSIONS AND, IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED, THE ASSEMBLY SPEAKERSHIP.

4. THE TULF REPRESENTS A FIVE-YEAR OLD EFFORT TO UNIFY POLITICALLY THE ISLAND'S TAMIL COMMUNITY. IT IS A UNION OF THE FEDERAL PARTY (FP), THE TAMIL CONGRESS (TC), AND THE CEYLON WORKERS CONGRESS (CWC). THE CWC IS NOT AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT SINCE ITS INDIAN TAMIL MEMBERS, MOSTLY VOTELESS TEA PLANTATION LABORERS, ARE DISPERSED THROUGHOUT THE CENTRAL HIGHLIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 COLOMB 02411 01 OF 02 140336Z

LANDS, NOT IN THE AREA OF THE TULF'S PROPOSED SEPARATE STATE, AND HAVE INTERESTS WIDELY DIVERGENT FROM THOSE OF THE TULF. (THEIR CONCERNS AND THOSE OF THE INDIAN TAMILS IN GENERAL WILL BE THE SUBJECT OF A SUBSEQUENT CABLE.) THE TAMIL CONGRESS, A LONG-STANDING RIVAL OF THE FP, HAD SEEMED MOSTLY RECONCILED TO THE UNION; HOWEVER DISSATISFACTION WITH TICKET ALLOCATION HAS RESULTED IN SOME DEFECTIONS. FOUR TC MEN WERE GIVEN TULF TICKETS ALTHOUGH THE PARTY HAD REQUESTED MORE. THOSE FOUR ENSURED THAT THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE TC WAS BROUGHT UNDER THE TULF AND THE PARTY'S NAME AND ELECTION SYMBOL EFFECTIVELY RETIRED THIS YEAR SO THAT NO DISSIDENTS COULD USE THEM. THE DISSIDENT CONTESTANTS HAVE TURNED OUT TO BE THE SON OF FORMER TC LEADER G.G. PONNAMBALAM (WHO BROUGHT THE TC INTO THE TULF FIVE YEARS AGO) AND THREE OTHERS, ALL RUNNING UNDER THE RUBRIC OF THE TAMIL CONGRESS YOUTH LEAGUE. THEY MAY HAVE SOME SUPPORT FROM DISENCHANTED TULF (FEDERAL PARTY) YOUTHS AS WELL.

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 02411 02 OF 02 140359Z
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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 COLOMBO 2411

5. THE TULF IS CERTAIN TO WIN ENOUGH SEATS TO BE IN A GOOD BARGAINING POSITION IF IT WANTS TO JOIN A COALITION. BUT ITS OWN CREDIBILITY AS THE SOLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE JAFFNA TAMILS DEPENDS ON A VERY GOOD SHOWING AT THE POLLS. THIS WILL BE THE FIRST TIME THE TULF IS FACING THE VOTERS AND THE FIRST TIME THAT AN AVOWEDLY SECESSIONIST PARTY IS CONTESTING. OBSERVERS EXPECT THAT THE TULF WILL WIN MOST OF ITS SEATS EASILY (PARTICULARLY SINCE THE OPPOSITION IS A MOTLEY BUNCH OF INDEPENDENTS AND SPLINTER GROUPS AND ONLY A FEW MAJOR PARTY CANDIDATES). BUT JAFFNA TAMILS ARE AN INSCRUTABLE BUNCH. AT LEAST ONE USUALLY PERCEPTIVE TAMIL POLITICAL COMMENTATOR HAS SUGGESTED THAT THE PARTY IS ENCOUNTERING UNEXPECTED OPPOSITION AND CAN ONLY BE SURE OF 15 - 18 SEATS OF THE 24 IT IS CONTESTING. THAT IS DECIDELY A MINORITY VIEW, HOWEVER.

6. THE TULF PLATFORM MINCES NO WORDS; UNLIKE FEDERAL PARTY MANIFESTOS OF THE PAST, IT DOESN'T CALL FOR LINGUISTIC REFORMS OR OTHER PALLIATIVES. RATHER IT ASKS A MANDATE FROM THE TAMILS FOR A SEPARATE STATE. THE MANIFESTO ENVISAGES THAT M.P.'S ELECTED ON THE TULF TICKET TO THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY (NSA) WILL, WITHOUT WITHDRAWING FROM THE NSA, ALSO PARTICIPATE IN A SEPARATE ASSEMBLY TO DRAFT A CONSTITUTION

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PAGE 02 COLOMB 02411 02 OF 02 140359Z

FOR THE NEW STATE AND PREPARE FOR SEPARATION FROM SRI LANKA. THE PRINCIPLES WHICH WILL GOVERN THE NEW STATE ARE SECULARISM, SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM, NON-ALIGNMENT, AND FRIENDSHIP WITH THE SINHALESE STATE TO THE SOUTH.

7. A PARTICULARLY INFLUENTIAL LOBBY WITHIN THE TULF IS THE RADICAL YOUTH, CHAFING UNDER THEIR LEADERS BUT STILL WITH SOME APPARENT INFLUENCE ON POLICY-MAKING. AMIRTHALINGAM, MIDDLE-AGED BUT SMYPATHETIC TO THE MILITANTS, IS QUICK TO ADMIT THAT HE AND HIS COLLEAGUES WILL SOON BE DISPLACED BY YOUTH LEAGUERS. THIS YEAR, HOWEVER, THOSE YOUTH WERE NOT ABLE TO CONVINCE THEIR ELDERS TO GRANT THEM THE 50 PERCENT OF THE TAMIL SEATS THEY CLAIMED THEY WANTED TO CONTEST. THE MOST PROMINENT YOUTH MILITANT RUNNING ON THE TULF TICKET THIS YEAR IS KASI ANANTHAN, A REVOLUTIONARY POET WHO WAS JAILED SEVERAL TIMES DURING THE PERIOD OF EMERGENCY RULE. DESPITE HIS NOMINATION, THERE ARE SOME REPORTS OF UNHAPPINESS AMONG THE RADICAL YOUTH WITH OTHER TULF CANDIDATES; HOWEVER SINCE THE TULF'ERS ARE GENERALLY THE MOST RADICAL ON THE BALLOT, THE YOUTH WOULD SEEM TO HAVE NO OTHER PLACE TO GO.

8. OTHER TAMIL "PARTIES" RUNNING CANDIDATES, ALL CLASSED AS INDEPENDENTS BY THE ELECTION DEPARTMENT, INCLUDE THE TAMIL SELF-RULE PARTY, THE TAMIL PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT, AND THE DISIDENT TAMIL CONGRESS YOUTH LEAGUE. ALL ARE SPLINTERS CENTERED AROUND ONE OR TWO PROMINENT PERSONALITIES. IN ADDITION, SEVERAL OTHER "INDEPENDENTS" ARE SLFP SUPPORTERS WHO FOUND IT IMPRUDENT TO CONTEST ON THE SLFP TICKET. THE UNP IS CONTESTING SEVEN SEATS IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE, THE SLFP THREE AND THE ULF TWO (BOTH LSSP). PARTICULARLY IN THE PERIPHERAL AREAS OF THE TAMIL REGION, THESE NATIONAL PARTIES ARE GIVEN SOME CHANCE OF VICTORY.

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PAGE 03 COLOMB 02411 02 OF 02 140359Z

9. THE COMMUNIST PARTY (CP) IS RUNNING NO CANDIDATES IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE THIS YEAR DESPITE ITS TRADITIONALLY SMALL BUT ENTHUSIASTIC FOLLOWING THERE. THE APPARENT CAUSE IS THE DECISION OF V. PONNAMBALAM, CP CHIEF IN THE NORTH, TO SUPPORT THE AIMS OF THE TULF, AN AVOWAL OF SUPPORT THAT TULF LEADERS TOLD US THEY TOOK WITH SURPRISE AND A LITTLE SUSPICION. PONNAMBALAM HAS NOW BEEN SUSPENDED FROM THE NATIONAL CP AND WAS REPORTEDLY OFFERED BUT DECLINED A TULF TICKET FOR THE ELECTION. HIS DECISION TO DEFY THE NATIONAL PARTY APPARENTLY REFLECTS THE GROWTH OF HARDLINE SECESSIONIST SENTIMENT IN THE JAFFNA AREA.

10. CEYLON TAMILS OUTSIDE THE TAMIL-MAJORITY AREAS OF THE NORTHERN AND EASTERN PROVINCES ARE LESS EASY TO CATEGORIZE POLITICALLY THAN THOSE OF JAFFNA. WHILE THEY ALL APPROVE THE BASIC AIM OF EASING LINGUISTIC AND EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THEIR COMMUNITY, SUPPORT FOR A SEPARATE STATE DECLINES RAPIDLY OUTSIDE THE NORTH. IN COLOMBO YOUNGER TAMILS APPEAR TO BE ADJUSTING THEMSELVES TO THE DOMINANCE OF THE SINHALA

LANGUAGE AND ARE EVEN WORKING PROFESSIONALLY IN IT (VIZ.,
THE LEGAL COMMUNITY). THEIR VOTES ARE LIKELY TO GO TO THE
NATIONAL PARTY WHICH OFFERS THE TAMILS MORE -- AND NEITHER
MAJOR PARTY IS BEING PARTICULARLY FORTHCOMING NOW IN FEAR
OF LOSING SINHALA VOTES BY MAKING CONCESSIONS.
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Message Attributes

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Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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